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ABSTRACT

A study examined how managers report handling conflict, in comparison with their subordinates' ratings. The model used includes two dimensions, concern for self and concern for others, with five interpersonal conflict-handling styles: Avoiding, Dominating, Compromising, Integrating, and Obliging. Data were gathered using the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory II on 109 managers and 372 subordinates from East Coast companies. The study found that managers and their subordinates agree on the ranking of the conflict management strategies used by managers, ranking them in order of frequency used as Integrating, Compromising, Obliging, Dominating, and Avoiding. Since the two most-used styles reflect social desirability, involving a moderate-to-high concern for self and others, these styles are more congruent with current organizational changes that espouse a more participative, group-based approach to managing employees and conflict. Differences were found between the managers' self-reported conflict management style and the subordinates' ratings. Managers reported being more Integrating and Dominating whereas their subordinates rated them as more Avoiding and less Compromising than the managers rated themselves. The study confirmed the assertion that self-report data may yield different information than ratings by other, suggesting that these two sources of information should be considered when evaluating managers' conflict management strategies. (11 references) (Author/KC)

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SUPERIOR-SUBORDINATE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLE REPORTED BY SELF AND OTHER

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Abstract

This study examines how managers report handling conflict in comparison with their subordinates' ratings. The model used includes two dimensions, concern for self and concern for others, with five interpersonal conflict handling styles, Avoiding, Dominating, Compromising, Integrating, and Obliging. The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory II was used on 109 managers and 372 subordinates from East Coast Companies. The results showed that managers and their subordinates agree on the ranking of conflict management strategies used by managers: Integrating, Compromising, Obliging, Dominating and Avoiding. Significant differences were found between self and subordinate ratings but low to moderate correlations between self and other reports.

SUPERIOR-SUBORDINATE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLE REPORTED BY SELF AND OTHER

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As organizations change, social forces from within and international pressures from without are causing managers to re-examine the basic tasks of management, including conflict management. Managers are being asked to use more interpersonal skills, especially in dealing with groups, to be more involved in handling issues and challenges and to not be so distant in their interactions with subordinates. Along with a change in role for the manager, an increased diversity in the work force has produced less homogeneous groupings in interpersonal style, attitudes, values, and interests, which is associated with increased conflict (Rahim, 1979).

A person's role as superior, subordinate, or peer may impact the style of handling conflict. This dimension is very important to the well-being of an organization due to the fact that a great deal of organizational conflict is hierarchical in nature (Pondy, 1967; Robbins, 1978; Rahim, 1986). There has been some research on differences in styles of handling conflict with superiors, subordinates, and peers (Daves & Holland, 1989; Rahim, 1986). An issue raised by these authors is the question of perspective of the parties involved, the potential for bias that it brings, and potential discrepancies between self-report and evaluation by another party.

Very few studies have looked at the referent role (superior subordinate and peer) as a variable in the choice of conflict management style. Daves and Holland (1989) found low correlations between self and subordinate ratings on the Howat and London Instrument, which suggests a discrepancy between how managers perceive their conflict behavior and subordinates perceptions of it.

This study examines how managers report handling conflict in comparison with their subordinates' ratings. The model used is based on two dimensions, concern for self and concern for others, with five resultant interpersonal conflict handling styles, Avoiding,

Dominating, Compromising, Integrating, and Obliging (Rahim, 1986). The Avoiding style would have a low concern for self and for others, the Dominating style would have a high concern for self and a low concern for others, while the Compromising style consists of an intermediate concern for self and others. One using the Integrating style would have a high concern for self and others and represents a desire to fully satisfy the concerns of both parties. This strategy is dependent upon an open exchange of information and an examinations of differences to reach a solution acceptable to both. The Obliging style has a high concern for self and a high concern for others and is the opposite of the Dominating style. The Obliging style emphasizes commonalties to satisfy the concerns of the other party. These are strategies, or styles, that people use when dealing with conflict.

In this study, interpersonal conflict refers to conflict between two or more organizational members of the same or different hierarchical levels or units. An obvious characteristic of an organization is the fact that everyone does not have the same amount of power or authority, and this may result in conflict. A complex organization imposes on its members a number of constraints that can affect their styles of handling interpersonal conflict. The person's role as superior, subordinate, or peer may impact the style of handling interpersonal conflict. A common perception of subordinates in organizations is that subordinates frequently say what is acceptable rather than what they know is true. This would be especially true when superiors use coercive power in an authoritarian attempt to control the behavior of the subordinates. Most previous studies have dealt with the styles of handling interpersonal conflict with superiors (Rahim, 1986).

It is the relationship of the superior-subordinate that is so important to the well-being of an organization due to the fact that a great deal of organizational conflict is hierarchical in nature (Pondy, 1967; Robbins, 1978; Rahim, 1986). By allowing different levels of status to individuals, organizations indirectly (or directly) encourage conflict. These conflicts arise because superiors attempt to control the behavior of subordinates, and subordinates resist such control. Even the use of terminology such as "superior" or "subordinate" is guaranteed to

encourage conflict in a "democratic" or collaborative society, or at least a society which professes such ideals

This study will look at interpersonal styles of conflict management in the superior-subordinate relationship with the subordinates evaluating the conflict strategy used by the superior and comparing that with the self-evaluated strategy indicated by the superior.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 109 managers and 372 subordinates of both sexes from East coast companies. The type of companies which participated in the study included consulting, software, biotechnology and production. The number of subordinates per manager ranged from 1 to 8 with an average of subordinates per manager of 2.44 and a mode of 3. The managers were from top (16.5%), middle (57.8%) and lower (25.7%) organizational levels. The mean age of the managers was 39.2 and the average years of work experience 17.9. In terms of functional areas of the managers, 22% were in Personnel, 18.3% were in Production and 14.7% were in Training & Development. Other demographic characteristics may be found in Table 1.

The subordinates' mean age was 37.1 and the average years of work experience 14.6. In terms of functional areas of the subordinates, 22.6% were in Production, 19.6% were in Personnel and there was a tie in two areas at 10.5% which were in Marketing and Training & Development. Other demographic information for the subordinates may be found in Table 2.

Instruments

The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) was used in this study. The manager's self-reported conflict management style with superiors and subordinates was assessed using the ROCI-II (Rahim, 1983), a self-report instrument which may be used to measure organizational members' intentions in interpersonal conflict with superiors (Form A), subordinates (Form B), and peers (Form C). Each form contains 28 statements which were selected on the basis of repeated factor and item analyses. Although there is no time limit to finishing the forms, subjects typically need about eight minutes to complete the ROCI-II. The subject responds to each statement on a five-point Likert scale which measures five independent dimensions of conflict strategies for the three groups with whom the individual interacts. A higher score represents the person's propensity to use a particular style, or styles, of handling interpersonal conflict. The ROCI-II is designed to measure five independent

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Subject Sample: Managers (N = 109)

Characteristic	n	%	M	SD
Sex:				
Male	54	49.5		
Female	55	51.5		
Age:			39.2	7.7
Yrs. Work Experience			17.9	7.7
Education:			4.1	1.2
High School	2	1.8		
Some College	8	7.3		
Bachelor's Degree	27	24.8		
Some Graduate Work	18	16.5		
Master's Degree	43	39.4		
Post-Graduate Work	11	10.1		
Organizational Level:				
Top (President, Vice Pres.)	18	16.5		
Middle (Directors)	63	57.8		
Lower (Supervisors, Managers)	28	25.7		
Non-Management	-	-		

Table 1, con't.

Characteristic	n	%
Functional Area:		
Production	20	18.3
Marketing	8	7.3
Finance & Accounting	9	8.3
Personnel	24	22.0
General Management	13	11.9
R & D	1	.9
Engineering	2	1.8
Sales	2	1.8
MIS	10	9.2
Training & Development	16	14.7
Other	4	3.7

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of the Subject Sample: Subordinates (N = 372)

Characteristic	n	%	M	SD
Sex:				
Male	173	46.5		
Female	199	53.5		
Age:			37.1	9.7
Yrs. Work Experience			14.6	9.1
Education:			3.1	1.4
High School	42	11.4		
Some College	97	26.4		
Bachelor's Degree	115	31.3		
Some Graduate Work	42	11.4		
Master's Degree	57	15.5		
Post-Graduate Work	15	4.1		
Organizational Level:				
Top (President, Vice Pres.)	4	1.1		
Middle (Directors)	57	16.1		
Lower (Supervisors, Managers)	121	34.1		
Non-Management	173	48.7		

Table 2, con't.

Characteristic	n	%
Functional Area:		
Production	84	22.6
Marketing	39	10.5
Finance & Accounting	28	7.5
Personnel	73	19.6
General Management	19	5.1
R & D	9	2.4
Engineering	14	3.8
Sales	14	3.8
MIS	26	7.0
Training & Development	39	10.5
Other	27	7.3

strategies of handling conflict. These five styles are Integrating (IN), Obliging (OB), Dominating (DO), Avoiding (AV), and Compromising (CO). In the development of the questionnaire, the potential problem of social desirability or response distortion bias was checked and a marginal but significant positive correlation between social desirability and integrating scales was found. Otherwise, Rahim (1983) concluded that the five scales of conflict are relatively free from social desirability or response distortion bias.

The Chronbach alpha (range = .72 to .77) of the individual scales of the ROCI-II are as follows (Rahim, 1986): IN (.77), OB (.72), DO (.72), AV (.75), and CO (.72) and has a mean of .74. Test-retest reliabilities, computed from students who filled out the ROCI-II twice at an interval of one week, ranged between .60 and .83 ($p < .0001$).

The subordinates also filled in the ROCI-II on their superiors so that comparable data was obtained from both superiors and subordinates. The instructions and the items of the ROCI-II were modified to reflect the subordinates' ratings of their superiors, as suggested by Rahim (1983) in the ROCI-II manual. The following instructions were given to the subordinates:

> "You may have incompatibilities, disagreements, or differences (i.e., conflict) with your boss. Rank each of the following statements to indicate how your boss handles conflict with you. Try to recall as many recent conflict situations as possible in ranking these statements. Mark your responses in the appropriate boxes in your answer sheet. There are no right or wrong answers. The response which is most characteristic of your boss's behavior in a situation of conflict with you, is the best answer. Any other answer, which may be considered as more desirable or acceptable, will simply lead to misleading information."

For the subordinates, the format of each item was changed from a self-report to a rating of the supervisor's behavior. For example, Item 1 (Form B), which reads, "I try to investigate an issue with my subordinates to find a solution acceptable to us.", was changed to "My boss tries to investigate an issue with me to find a solution acceptable to us."

Analyses

To compare the hierarchy of conflict management styles among managers and subordinates the means obtained for each scale of the ROCI-II (self-report) were rank ordered and compared. Repeated measures ANOVAs with two within-subjects factors, rater and scale, were used to test the differences between self-report and subordinate report across the ROCI-II scales. When an interaction between scale and rater was found, paired t-tests were used. The relationship between the self-reports and subordinate ratings on the ROCI-II was determined using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients.

RESULTS

Concerning rank ordering of styles, both managers and subordinates indicated managers as using the Integrating style of handling conflict, followed by Compromising, Obliging, Dominating and Avoiding. The data did not reveal rank order differences between self and subordinate reports (see Table 3).

The ANOVA results were significant for the rater and scale within-subject factors, and for the interaction term rater x scale (see Table 4). The significant F test for rater indicates that there are significant differences between self and other reports across the five ROCI-II scales.

The significant scale x rater interaction shows that the scale profiles for self versus other reports are not parallel. The paired t-test results confirm the differences between self and subordinate reports (see Table 3). Managers reported to be significantly more Integrating but more Dominating in handling conflict than their subordinates. In contrast, subordinates rated managers as more avoiding and less compromising than the managers.

An examination of the scale means shows that the top three conflict management styles reported by managers were Integration, followed by Compromising and Obliging (see Table 3). Both managers and their subordinates rated managers as using the Integrating style of handling conflict first, followed by Compromising, Obliging, Dominating and Avoiding. However, the paired t-test yielded significant differences in scale means between the self and subordinate reports (see Table 3). As predicted, managers reported themselves to be significantly more Integrating in handling conflict than their subordinates. Significant differences were also found for the Avoiding and Compromising scales, with subordinates rating managers as more avoiding and less compromising in conflict management style than did the managers themselves.

Low to moderate correlations were found between self-reports and subordinate ratings on the ROCI-II (See Table 5), with the exception of a significant moderate correlation on Avoiding.

Table 3

Rank-Ordered Means and Paired t-tests on the ROCI-II Scales of Managers' Self and Subordinate Reports[a] (N = 109)

Scale	Self M	Subordinate M	t
Integration	4.32	4.05	5.20***
Compromising	3.76	3.61	2.27*
Obliging	3.47	3.47	.06
Dominating	3.34	3.12	2.79**
Avoiding	2.71	2.88	-2.84**

The analyses were performed upon the average rating per scale per manager
a *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Table 4

ANOVA Results with Rater and Scale as Within-Subjects Factors and the ROCI-II Scales as Dependent Variables (N = 109)

Factor	MS	Error	F	df	p
Within-Subjects					
Rater	2.296	.325	7.06	1,108	.009
Scale	58.274	.278	209.88	4,432	.001
Scale x Rater	1.661	.181	9.17	4,432	.001

Table 5

Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Self and Subordinate Ratings on the ROCI-II[a] (N = 109)

Scale	r
Integration	.14
Obliging	-.08
Dominating	.13
Avoiding	.41***
Compromising	.01

[a] The analyses were performed upon average subordinate ratings per scale per manager.
***$p < .001$

DISCUSSION

The data shows the same rank order of conflict management styles reported by managers and subordinates: Integration, Compromising, Obliging, Dominating and Avoiding. This is similar to the rank ordering found by Rahim (1986) in a sample of 1219 managers. Rahim found that when the target was subordinate, Integration was the primary conflict style, followed by Compromising. These two primary styles may reflect social desirability since both styles can be considered positive ones, involving a moderate to high concern for self and other. With these styles, both parties of the conflict "win" while with the Avoiding, Dominating, or Obliging one of the parties loses. This ranking is corroborated by the subordinates, so it is not just a case of self-serving self-reporting on the part of the manager, but may be considered an objective reflection of the manager's actual behavior. These styles are more congruent with current organizational changes which desire a more participative, group-based approach to managing employees and conflict. Several authors have proposed that these styles are more effective in a democratic work environment because they imply a balance between the self and other dimensions (Chusmir & Mills, 1989; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; Yelsma & Brown, 1985).

Support was found for differences between the managers self-reported conflict management style and the subordinate's ratings with managers reporting being more Integrating and Dominating than did their subordinates. Therefore, although both managers and subordinates appear to share a common perception of the predominant conflict management styles used by managers, there seems to be a discrepancy in the extent to which they report these behaviors. Subordinates rated their supervisors as being more Avoiding and less Compromising. The managers' report suggests they see their behavior in a more positive light than their subordinates. However, managers also saw themselves as more Dominating than their subordinates.

This discrepancy may be explained in a variety of ways. If the manager's self-report is more subject to self-serving biases, then the subordinate ratings may be a better predictor of

their behavior than the self-report data (Daves & Holland, 1989). However, the role and power differential may also shape a negative bias on the part of the subordinate, which may lead to negative attributions of the manager's behavior (Howat & London, 1980). A negative attribution on the part of the subordinates may also stem from the subordinates perceiving a discrepancy between their attitudes and beliefs and that of their superiors, including their beliefs about appropriate styles of handling conflict.

Another explanation may be the organizational climate. If the organization is unstable (e.g., going through massive layoffs) this is could affect the reporting of conflict management style by both managers and subordinates (Likert & Likert, 1976). Regarding the managers' self-reports, instability might force the managers to perceive Integration as the more desirable management style because of the need for more cooperation or, if there is a crisis mentality, it could encourage a more Dominating approach to interacting with their subordinates. Integration is appropriate in complex situations where commitment and resources are required from other parties in order to solve common problems and there is the expectation of a future relationship between the parties. On the other hand, a Dominating style, from the manager's point of view, would be appropriate when a speedy decision and/or an unpopular course of action is required. Both of these situations could describe the state of affairs in corporations in the Northeast at the time this study was effected. From the subordinate's point of view, the power differential would tend to be accentuated in an unstable environment, with subordinates endorsing a more negative and defensive attributional system towards the manager's behaviors.

The results in this study confirm the assertion that self-report data may yield different information than ratings by other, and suggest that these two sources of information should be considered when evaluating manager conflict management strategies. This study shows that the styles most reported are positive and socially desirable strategies, namely, Integrating and Compromising. However, the subordinates see the manager's conflict management strategies in a more negative light than the managers, which may constitute an additional source of conflict at a time when uncertainty and change are prominent in he world of work.

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